

ARQUA

281 Church St. (White St.),**212-334-1888. \$\$\$\$. All major.** A soaring and dramatic room at night; and even better during the day, when the long windows trap the austere Tribeca light. This starkly elegant, culinarily unimpeachable Northern Italian restaurant's become a stop for a devout and well-heeled Tribeca population, who turn out on weeknights to quietly eat superlative food: beef carpaccio, excellent daily risotti, zuppa di pesce, veal scaloppini and incredible gnocchi: dumplings of a profound delicacy, liquescing at their core and touched by a tomato and herb sauce. LWA.

ECCO

124 Chambers St. (betw. W. B'way & Church St.),**212-227-7074. \$\$\$ All major.** A high tin ceiling, tile floors, 19th-century advertising prints and a polished bar backed with mirrors and glass cabinets conspire to lend this wonderful Italian restaurant not far from City Hall a Thomas Nast-era ambience—as if fat Mr. Tweed himself were about to barge through the door any moment accompanied by a Tammany rabble. Start with a Caesar salad and a selection from the massive antipasti table, then proceed to such excellent pasta entrees as the linguine pescatore, spaghetti puttanesca or penne vodka. The meat and poultry dishes are impressive as well, especially the veal parmesan and the bistecca alla Ecco—a shell steak that upon being placed in front of you smacks you in the head with the rich effluvia of rosemary and garlic. The good wine list is a bit expensive; the help is courtly. LWA.

GIOVANNI'S ATRIUM

100 Washington St. (Rector St.),**212-513-4133. \$\$\$ All major.** Giovanni and Suzan Natalucci's Italian institution, which has been serving Roman specialties for nearly 30 years, was recently deemed a "New York treasure" by Mayor Bloomberg. One visit and you'll see why: the cuisine is magnificent—especially gnocchi with pesto and polenta in a tomato and basil reduction—and the Nataluccis treat their guests like family, often stopping by the tables to say hello. Save room for dessert, because the cart's filled with tantalizing afterthoughts even the strongest-willed won't be able to resist. WA

GOOD WORLD BAR & GRILL

3 Orchard St. (Division St.),**212-925-9975. \$\$ All major.** A spare, soothing, gracefully high-ceilinged restaurant filled with muted green colors—it's wonderfully airy during the summer—on a deserted block on Chinatown's northern edge, serving Scandinavian food (herring plates, fish soup, boiled shrimp, potato pancakes) that's good enough, given the dirt-cheap prices. A friendly bohemian vibe here, as if Good World were the best restaurant in some laid-back college town like Berkeley or Boulder. The bar up front's a comfortable place to sit with arts types and drink from a huge selection of tap beers and, in summer, watch Chinese kids play in the empty street outside. DJs spin records some nights, though, so be careful. WA.

THAILAND RESTAURANT

106 Bayard St. (Baxter St.),**212-349-3132. \$\$ AE.** Probably the only reason not to lock yourself into the garage with your old man's Chevy if you get chosen for jury duty. Because Thailand Restaurant, located near Foley Square—this place is absolutely jammed at lunch with employees of the District Attorney's office—is where you'll eat if you end up fulfilling your citizen's duty, and it's worth living for. The pad Thai's

good, and so's the spicy shrimp soup with lemongrass—but we've ordered the green chicken curry with white rice the last 12 times we've eaten here. A good place to pick up a bailiff with a shoulder holster and a fat pension. LWA.

BALLATO

55 E. Houston (betw. Mott & Mulberry Sts.),

212-274-8881. \$\$ All major. Once a local joint noted for its sub-\$10 prix fixe, Ballato's is a bit more elegant these days, though affable proprietor Emilio Ballato and his staff are nonetheless welcoming. Paint-daubed walls, wood floors and abundant flowers are warmly sconce-lit to give the room a Tuscan feel, but the menu's all over Italy. The Bolognese sauce is some of the best in the city, and we've never been disappointed by a veal dish (nor the sausage entree, come to think of it). Pasta alla Emilio (creamy prosciutto and peas) and the linguine with white clams are pasta standouts; and keep your fingers crossed for the exceptional calf's liver special. Our visitors from la France profonde—and they really do know—swear by the tripe-in-tomato-sauce appetizer. Very good wine list. LWA

CAFE LEBOWITZ

14 Spring St. (Elizabeth St.),

212-219-2399. \$\$-\$\$\$ All major. Trend-chasers want to eat at Lebowitz because it's owned by Brian McNally, of Odeon and Balthazar. A better reason would be that it's a moderately priced cafe with loads of personality and plenty of great food—in a neighborhood where far too many restaurants spend their budgets and energy baiting trend-chasers. Lebowitz fare includes luscious European sandwiches like herring, red onion, apple and horseradish on black bread; salads like fennel, orange, feta and watercress; great soups including borscht; well-seasoned and -grilled fresh fish; Hungarian goulash with noodles; excellent linguine with clams; wienerschnitzel; steak either cooked or (a specialty) tartare with capers, onions and pickles. If its hot moment isn't over when you're reading this, just visit off-hours. Anyone who'd treat a low-key place like Lebowitz as a place to be seen is probably not worth seeing. LWA

EMERALD PLANET

2 Great Jones St. (betw. Lafayette St. & B'way),

212-353-9727. \$ All Major. This stylishly hip walk-in restaurant serves the stylishly hip burritos known as wraps—jerked chicken, say, with mango salsa, caramelized onions and jasmine rice, wrapped in a tomato tortilla. The ingredients are fresh and high-quality, the execution excellent: still one of the best quick lunches in the Soho/Noho nexus. And while the crowd's a little Details, the fruit smoothies are worth it. LWA

FLOR'S KITCHEN

149 1st Ave. (betw. 9th & 10th Sts.),

212-387-8949. \$-\$\$ All major. A cheap, tiny, wonderful East Village storefront Venezuelan restaurant. Since the food's Venezuelan, everything's simple, filling and relatively healthful, from a great chicken soup infused with the refreshing flavor of corn to a chewy—and, in the South American manner, extremely lean—grilled steak with yucca, to arroz con pollo that's probably the best we've ever eaten: a pile of fragrant white rice reminiscent of basmati with—alongside of it—a chicken leg and thigh bathed in a rich reddish-brownish sauce of incredible succulence. Great arepas and adequate ceviches, too—and since dinner entrees cost only between eight and nine dollars, neighborhood residents will forgive themselves for patronizing the place (Flor's does takeout, too) a couple of times a week. NWA.

LE JARDIN BISTRO

25 Cleveland Pl. (betw. Kenmare & Spring Sts.),

212-343-9599. \$\$\$ All major. This neighborhood favorite serves Manhattan's best cassoulet and bouillabaisse. The interior's a snug, warm, nurturing hutch that makes you forget that bleak, glass-littered stretch of Cleveland Pl. on the other side of the street. Our dinners here generally devolve into immensely pleasurable and elaborate marathons of sea-based protein and alcohol, from

champagne and beer up top to brandy and God knows what else bringing up the rear. There's a great steak frites, plus omelets and sweetbreads, along with a good, basic wine list. A neighborhood favorite in the best sense of the term. The garden's good when it's warm out. LWA.

LE SOUK

45 Ave. B (betw. 3rd & 4th Sts.),

212-777-5454. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** Suggestively decorated North African restaurant offers Moroccan tagines and other fare fit for a sultan. One of the best places to catch some bellydancing, Le Souk boasts a male dancer who thrusts his hips, as well as a veiled female counterpart. The space has three parts, the best are the back open-air garden and under the large tent, where you get to sit on low couches. The adjacent Harem lounge fills up later in the evening as the DJ spins North African mixes. Try to reserve the four-poster bed to enjoy your drinks and mezze plates on for an even more decadent pleasure. WA

LIL' FRANKIE'S PIZZA

19 1st Ave. (betw. 1st & 2nd Sts.),

212-420-4900. \$\$. **No credit cards.** The owners of the justly popular Frank invested so much love and care in their pizza-parlor spinoff, it's like a gift to the neighborhood. Lil' Frankie's brick-oven pies are in the same league as some of the best in New York. The sauce is strong and balanced, the cheese is fresh and creamy, the thin crust is ultra-crispy—and toppings are the restaurant's strong suit. Salads and antipasto appetizers demonstrate the same care for and skill with fresh ingredients that makes it hard to get a table at Frank (try the fava bean soup with dandelion greens). A wide array of inexpensive small dishes cooked in that domed Neapolitan oven is the main attraction, but the heartier pastas al forno and baked fish entrees it births are also delicious. Save room for some Nutella focaccino dessert. WA

LIMA'S TASTE

432 E. 13th St. (betw. 1st Ave. & Ave. A),

212-228-7900. \$\$. **V, MC.** Mom-and-Pop Peruvian restaurant, working with Grandma's recipes, supplies the trendy East Village with a rare example of artisanal cuisine. Let the fish ceviche rope you in, then get adventurous with potato crafts like papa rellena—sauteed beef and raisins in what amounts to a giant french fry—or papa a la ocapa, with peppers, cheese, garlic and Peruvian black mint. Follow up with chicken in yellow pepper cream sauce (ask for it spicy), grilled ribs or escaveche chicken in a panca pepper sauce with yucca and sweet onion. If you know Peruvian food, all you need to know is that this is a good place to get some. If not, understand that the cuisine consists of ancient and delicious preparations of ingredients you've eaten before. You'll like it. NWA

LUCIEN

14 1st Ave. (1st St.),

212-260-6481, \$\$\$, **all major.** A French bistro on the downtown model: tiny, cramped, inexpensive, filled to all hours by a fashionable and very young crowd, characterized by the appropriate Left Bank atmospherics (the mirrors, the golden light) and extremely friendly, from the moment you're greeted at the door to the moment at meal's end when, with a busboy's help, you squeeze your body out from behind your table. The food is fine, and somewhat more traditional than the food at other downtown bistros: escargots, sweetbreads with frisee salad and diced bacon, frog-legs, endive salad, bouillabaisse, rabbit in mustard sauce, roast chicken, steak frites, a rack of lamb and so on. Make sure you reserve, since the place is too snug to make waiting at the bar a viable option. WA.

MEXICAN RADIO

19 Cleveland Pl. (betw. Spring & Kenmare Sts.),

212-343-0140. \$\$. **All major.** Perennial Best of Manhattan award winner remains the place to stalk the elusive Dos Equis draft to accompany sizzling chorizo or the Radio Nachos, tri-color chips mounded with integrity-retaining black or pinto beans, muenster, fresh salsa and, best of all,

snappy pickled jalapeno rings. Move on to the citrus-/garlic-/spicy-sauced shredded-pork carnitas, the perfect enchiladas mole or the best chile rellenos on the island. Crowds can be boisterous, and service can be rushed, with entrees appearing before appetizers have been dented, but neither will dampen the spirits buoyed by a sampling from the margarita list or just a look around at the joyously Mex-orated room. WA

OLD DEVIL MOON

511 E. 12th St. (betw. Aves. A & B),

212-475-4357. \$-\$\$. All major. Started coming here for brunch on wasted weekend early afternoons: fat sticky buns thickening our blood, omelets overstuffed with sausage or thick, salty ham settling our wretched guts, coffee cutting through the belligerent haze around our heads like turpentine cuts through paint. And the sweetest waitresses—angels of morning, bringing their seraphic ministry to the beer-addled wallet-chain hipsters of the world. The most wonderful breakfast/brunch downtown. Dinner's as crowded as brunch, and as good. Spiced cornmeal-crusted catfish with rice hash and slaw, accompanied by a couple Sierra Nevadas. Or chicken-fried steak. There are vinyl booths along the walls, and the decor is classic early-90s grunge-era kitsch, like a time warp. LWA.

RICE

227 Mott St. (betw. Prince & Spring Sts.),

212-226-5775. \$. No credit cards. Boil that shit up (we mostly order the basmati, though we like the sticky rice and the black rice, too), throw a topping over it in the bowl (we like the ratatouille, the lemongrass chicken salad, the vegetarian meatballs, the lentil stew and the black beans) and either slide it toward us across the takeout annex's counter or serve it to us at a table in the restaurant proper, right next door. In whichever part of the establishment you eat, however, the food's the same—it's good and inexpensive—and the ambience is as stylish as it should be in Little Italy at the turn of the century: gamines wait outside for tables on warmer nights, and yoginis sip high-concept dishes as they await their takeout orders. Excellent thyme-inflected butternut squash soup and caldo verde. Beer. A good paella on Wednesday nights. House music. In summer, a hoary old fan, an iconic objet d'art in itself. WA.

RISA

47 E. Houston St. (betw. Mulberry & Mott Sts.),

212-625-1712. \$\$\$. All major. A pretty good and reasonably priced Mediterranean in the upstairs portion of the space the old Knitting Factory used to occupy (the downstairs portion of course now houses Botanica, where the youngsters get horny). What we ate here: a creamless seafood bisque worked through with saffron, gemelli with sauteed seafood and green pieces of zucchini and a pizza napoletana, which means a pizza with tomatoes and mozzarella and capers and anchovies. The service can be erratic, if sweet, but the space is warmly lit and graceful, and in warm weather the huge front windows open breezily onto the street. A very credible restaurant if you're in B'way-Lafayette area; before a movie at the Angelika, say. NWA.

BAR K

255 W. 10th St. (Hudson St.),

212-633-1133. \$\$. All major. If yer a-fixin' to chow down ya'll be hard-pressed to find better grub than at this price point. The college-ruled ring-binder menu of "small" and "middle plates" offers up spicy "city western cuisine." Jumbo shrimp with sour-cream remoulade and sweet potato griddlecakes are sublime. Chicken stew swimming with cilantro dumplings is downhome comfort, and the peppery smoked salmon with hominy cake is a hoe-down for your tongue. Say howdy to the big frozen margarita with blood-orange puree. Then kick back and take in the grassy decor under the watchful eyesockets of past grazers. WA

BINY

8 Thompson St.(betw. Canal & Grand Sts.),

212-334-5490. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** Hip new Japanese restaurant located in southern Soho takes fashion to a new level with roomy white leather seats and artfully crafted food presentations. Their petite metal-made menu follows suit, listing traditional Japanese favorites like wonderfully fresh sushi and tempura. But we were more impressed by the signature lava grill that we ordered with the vegetable delight entree—the food's great, but the coolest thing is that you cook it yourself on a hot volcanic stone. (Better than we can do at home with a skillet.) After several drinks we found out what cooked sushi tasted like, then retired to a private karaoke room to belt out our favorite Elvis tune. BINY rents the karaoke rooms by the hour; you and the rest of the downtowners can be serenading each other in the main dining room after 10 p.m. NWA

FLORENT

69 Gansevoort St. (betw. Washington & Greenwich Sts.), **212-989-5779. \$\$-\$\$\$.** **No credit cards.** A semi-converted—and, late at night, always crowded—former diner, Florent was a pioneer in the formerly foul-smelling heart of the meatpacking district. Why's Florent so popular? Its neighborhood's persistently dark and moody appeal doesn't hurt. Neither does the good food, especially the mandatory steak frites. Neither does the fact that it's open all night on weekends, which means that at some point everybody ends up here at 2 in the morning, craving protein. (A friend of ours claims that Madonna gave him the eye here one night, but that's obviously bullshit.) Reservations recommended at night. (A second friend of ours used to proselytize in favor of coming here late afternoon, but the idea never caught on.) LWA.

THE GREY DOG'S COFFEE

33 Carmine St. (betw. Bedford & Bleecker Sts.), **212-462-0041. \$-\$\$.** **No credit cards.** We like to stop in here after a walk. Oversized paintings of pampered friends adorn the walls, and there's room to lie down under the well-worn tables. On a recent visit some bitch barked at us for invading her turf, but usually the patrons are very well-mannered. Those of the two-legged persuasion can enjoy a glass of wine, smoke near the front windows and nosh on baked goods, burgers and sandwiches (they seem to really like the smoked salmon BLT), while engaging in their blah blah as they tend to do. Could you grab us one from the basket of dog biscuits? We can't reach. LWA

HONMURA AN

170 Mercer St. (betw. Houston & Prince Sts.), **212-334-5253. \$\$\$.** **All major.** We don't do a lot of Nobu, so as far as we're concerned, Honmura An offers the best all-around Japanese food downtown. As is the case with all Japanese food, though, nothing on Honmura An's menu will fill you up. You might order Japanese pickles to start, or rich and flavorful chicken meatballs, or fresh steamed asparagus and a plate of iso age—delicate rolls of prawns, soba and shiso leaf, wrapped in nori and deep-fried. For main courses ask for a plain bowl of cold udon noodles or a larger, steaming version topped with prawn tempura, chicken, fish cakes and vegetables. Soba's a holy word here; we especially like the kamoran, which pairs those noodles with a duck broth. Pay your bill at the end of the evening and then walk five blocks west to Pepe Rosso, where a plate of penne pomodoro will satisfy your hunger. NWA.

NOI BISTRO

271 Bleecker St. (betw. Morton & Cornelia Sts.), **212-366-0635. \$\$-\$\$\$.** **All major.** Traditional hand-painted Majolica plates, serving dishes and pitchers line the walls of Noi. The new Italian bistro, which doubles as an art gallery, was started by Sicilian chef (and former Fiorello chef) Marco Carmelo Barrilá. His wife runs the Little Italy ceramic boutique, Il Coccio, that supplies the aforementioned items—both for sale and employed to serve their fine Italian fare. The food is completely fresh, often hand-selected by Barrilá himself, and made from scratch daily. Our favorites include the always-scrumptious bruschetta di verdure miste, with finely cut tomatoes that don't fall off the oil-infused bread, and the simple yet saliva-inducing pasta cooked with eggplant. Great food, and easier to get into than Babbo. WA

PASTIS

9 9th Ave. (Little W. 12th St.),

212-929-4844. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** The crowd is not so attractive as you might expect, but the brunch bread basket is gorgeous, containing Balthazar Bakery's fruit focaccia, chocolate bread, brioche, sticky buns and nut bread. The salad of beets, endive, Roquefort and walnuts is well-liked, as are the classic desserts. Service is personable and occasionally bumpy service, but reservations are now accepted, and their takeout and delivery menu is listed on a refrigerator-worthy postcard. Good bang for your buck here. Don't miss out on the fries. WA

RAOUL'S

180 Prince St. (betw. Sullivan & Thompson Sts.),

212-966-3518. \$\$\$\$. **All major.** The hoary, eternal Soho institution: this dark cave of a restaurant jammed with tables, dominated by a great ancient battleship of a scarred-wood bar and food that's once luxurious and straight-up: roast duck, garlic snails, asparagus vinaigrette and, of course, the steak frites, which is what you tend to think of when you think of eating at Raoul's. Jam-packed with a pretty crowd most nights—uptown girls with downtown tastes—but you'll also find craggy middle-age artists left over from the 70s and eating happily alone at the welcoming bar, as they have every week for 20 years, as well as the occasional regular person. The bar steak—a smaller steak to be consumed at the bar—is a cool feature of the menu. WA

14TH-34TH ST. (EAST)

BLUE SMOKE

116 E. 27th St. (betw. Park Ave. S. & Lexington Ave.), 212-447-7733. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** An instant smash hit for Danny Meyer & Co. The three- and four-deep bar offers retro drinks like a "Dark and Stormy" or mint julep, and Brooklyn Brewery's Blue Smoke Ale makes for a most excellent dining companion. There's much gnawing of big platters of dry-rub ribs throughout the joint. Sandwiches of smoked meats, peppered cole slaw and crunchy pickles shine; desserts do not. The bedroom community well-heeled have taken this place for their own, so make a reservation, and request a table in the pussy-willow brick dining room. Or, pay the \$15-\$20 cover for the jazz club offering a limited menu downstairs. WA

HANGAWI

12 E. 32nd St. (betw. Madison & 5th Aves.),

212-213-0077. \$\$. **All major.** A vegetarian Korean restaurant sounds like an oxymoron, but this soothing temple to the gustatory pleasures of the root, the nut and the leaf makes the concept work. You leave your shoes at the door, slide under a low table, order the Emperor's Meal and a bottle of cold plum wine and resign yourself. The meal will include porridges in graceful crockery as well as various sprouts, root-shavings and vegetables arranged on earthenware platters with a miniaturist's art. You can't walk out of Hangawi without feeling calmer and purer (if, truthfully, still a bit hungry). The service is as graceful as the room and the food. Bring a PowerBar for afterward. NWA.

RODEO BAR & GRILL

375 3rd Ave. (27th St.),

212-683-6500. \$\$. **All major.** Cavernous South Texas honky-tonk ambience not too far from Gramercy Park, with the food more appropriate to the former: excellent burgers (including the nicely lean bison burger we generally opt for), good barbecued ribs, chicken and brisket and a whole heck of lot of Tex Mex items, from quesadillas to burritos to enchiladas to fajitas, and on and on and on. And also, ad infinitum, beer—a good amount of which we consume when we come to Rodeo Bar to check out their live country acts. Ask when the Hangdogs are playing next, and get a load of the stuffed-and-mounted bison above the bar. WA.

ROLF'S BAR & RESTAURANT

281 3rd Ave. (22nd St.),

212-473-8718. \$\$\$. **All major.** The longstanding and undisputed king among New York's German restaurants, Rolf's has earned the title—and continues to do so. It can be daunting from the

outside, but step through the door and be won over. With an efficient and very pleasant staff, a quiet atmosphere (lots of vines and Christmas lights), a remarkable beer list and the best wurst in town, Rolf's is no place to go for a light snack. The dinners are massive, with piles of meats and potatoes and the most amazing sauerkraut you've ever tasted. We recommend the wienerschnitzel or the basic Oktoberfest wurst platter. Warning—all that food doesn't come cheap. Dinner for two, together with six rounds, can run well over \$100. Reservations suggested. WA

TANDA

331 Park Ave. S. (betw. 24th & 25th Sts.),

212-253-8400. \$\$\$. All major. Sexy surroundings, but casual dress at this spot serving exciting dishes in a Vietnameseish vein. Recommended: the steamed rice-noodle dumpling appetizer stuffed with star anise-braised oxtail and topped with spiced green edamame puree; entrees of "turmeric scented" striped bass and a mild green curry chicken. For dessert, warm chocolate chip cookies with coconut milk, better than Mom's. Upstairs in the welcoming lounge, witness heavy consumption of Asian-inspired drancy finks. Lavatory sinks are set off from the bar by only a beaded curtain, so wave to your date instead of adjusting your strapless. WA

BONGO

299 10th Ave. (betw. 27th & 28th Sts.),

212-947-3654. \$\$-\$\$\$. All major. A gallery-district outpost amid the taxi stands of 10th Ave. (it's right next door to Punjabi Food Junction), Bongo is a stylish place with some great seafood. Retro-hip interior decorating is one attraction, but oysters are the house specialty—a rotating stock of four to six out of some two dozen varieties listed on the menu keeps the place interesting for regulars. Also available is a great lobster roll sandwich, fine smoked fishes from a robust little New England smokehouse and a selection of cheery cocktails to match the Jetson's-esque furniture. If you don't appreciate the effort that went into setting the scene, Bongo will seem a little overpriced, but play along and you'll have a whole lot of fun. LWA

KANG SUH

1250 Broadway (32nd St.),

212-564-6845. \$\$. All major. Walk by the sushi bar downstairs and head up to the smoky dining room to join the crowd of families grilling marinated meats and vegetables over charcoal at their table grills; splitting orders of Korean dishes such as chap chae, mandoo and bibimbap from the huge menu (try the oyster-scallion pancake); and picking at the selection of free side dishes, including some good kimchi. Novices intimidated by the menu are advised to request help from the friendly waitstaff, though they might not get it—employees here are as often as not monolingual. NWA.

L'ACAJOU

53 W. 19th St. (betw. 5th & 6th Aves.),

212-645-1706. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$. All major. There aren't too many soul-healing places you can pull into on a dreary weekday afternoon and be assured not just of elegantly prepared food, but also a curative to the glooms of a fading day. What's great about L'acajou is not just that it's an Alsatian restaurant, as opposed to yet another xeroxed French bistro, but that it embraces the food of neglected Gallic regions without becoming fussily curatorial about the cooking (there're a lot of gentle items on the menu, as well as plenty of robust dishes like rabbit and quails, depending on the season). What we can't live without is the bar. Either the delicious, chewy steak frites or the steak au poivre is what we eat there—or the omelet du jour, with a glass of Rhone red. All the papers are there to read; your fellow diners are close enough to you that you can eavesdrop on them, far enough away that you can ignore them. The bar is a weathered mahogany, sturdy yet not ponderous. When it's solitude in society you want, the chance to restore yourself without being pestered about it, this is where you go. LWA.

OPEN

559 W. 22nd St. (11th Ave.),

212-243-1851. \$\$. All major.

Exceptional grazing for the gallery set, the Chelsea locals and you, can be had at this cool lounge with a mini-menu of cold plates and short list of wines by the glass. Square shapes and red-orange reign, as does the house martini of vodka, mint, lime juice and grenadine. Quality smoked salmon comes with herbed olives, toasts and dreamy dilled creme fraiche. The quartet of Gorgonzola, chevre, Gouda and Camembert is in its prime and accompanied by figs, apricots and fresh, airy bread. Plates of charcuterie and pate also available. Sweet service. WA

AQ CAFE

58 Park Ave. (betw. 37th & 38th Sts.),

212-847-9745. \$\$. All major. Young tourists stop for a late lunch within the Scandinavia House. Although all but one of the 17 tables are empty, their alpha male, without realizing it, selects the table nearest yours and the seat that gives him the best view of you. He gazes at you absentmindedly until his friends join him. Their trays hold sandwiches, Swedish meatball among them, and a “smorgasbord” plate of snacks. The alpha male says, “This is a really good meal,” to a chorus of enthusiastic “Yeah”s. You are equally enthusiastic about your salmon lasagna. After you’ve browsed the revolving Nordic inventory of the adjoining gift shop, the pleasant guard at the reception desk urges you to have a good day. On this bright, clean stretch of Park Ave. on a cool sunny afternoon, that seems almost a certainty. WA

AUREOLE

34 E. 61st St. (betw. Madison & Park Aves.),

212-319-1660. \$\$\$\$. All major. Caveat emptor. For \$150 in Manhattan, we expect cuisine so remarkable that conversation is forced to a halt with the arrival of each new dish, as we come to terms with its remarkable intensity, subtlety, grace—hell, for \$150, with its epistemological implications. Charlie Palmer’s contemporary American culinary vision doesn’t reach such exalted heights all the time, but it’s got a respectable record, and no one’s eating here anyway who’s forced to worry about good value. This elegant townhouse restaurant has managed to persist in its fulsomely wealthy neighborhood long enough to have grounded Palmer’s reputation as one of the city’s most important chef-entrepreneurs. You’ve probably heard about the desserts, which certainly are extraordinary: mad spun-sugar jungle-gyms and Tower-of-Babel constructions, sculptural studies in pastry architectonics that have be disassembled like Erector Sets before they can be consumed. NWA.

CAFE LARGO

3387 Broadway (betw. 137th & 138th Sts.),

212-862-8142. \$\$. All major. Largo bills itself as a “West Harlem Oasis,” and that’s no exaggeration—it’s an unusually comfortable and serene spot. The room is wood and brick, the food mostly Dominican and the clientele an amiable mix of City College students and neighborhood regulars of all stripes. The yellow rice specialties, whole fish and grilled steaks are prime examples of Largo’s unpretentious expertise—the feel is upscale, but the flavor is home-cooked. Don’t expect intense spice, and don’t leave without trying the homemade flan. It comes off like caramel ice cream crossbred with a cloud. WA

CAFE SABARSKY

1048 5th Ave. (86th St.),

212-288-0665. \$\$. All major. Take Mom or the out-of-towners for Viennese pastries and a carefully replicated European atmosphere with dark woods and mottled marble on the ground floor of the Neue Galerie. There are salads and sandwiches and goulash with spaetzle, but the real reason you’re here is the multilayered tortes with mounds of whipped cream alongside. Try not to get a headache while strategizing your dessert selection. Those missing a sweet tooth may indulge in Austrian beer or wine instead. If you sprechen Sie Deutsch have a chat with the smashingly spectacled manager. WA

CAFE TREVI

1570 1st Ave. (betw. 81st & 82nd Sts.),

212-249-0040. \$\$\$. **All major.** An excellent old-school Italian restaurant in a relatively bleak subsection of the Upper East Side the isolation of which plays to the restaurant's strengths. Owner/maitre d' Primo Laurenti's managed to win for himself a loyal clientele willing to cab up to Yorkville, while avoiding the liabilities that geographical centrality—around Union Square, for instance—can involve: the attention of 1990s-style foodies, the patronage of fashionable and obnoxious youth. Trevi's not stylish, but it's almost everything else, including reliably excellent. Sauteed portobellos, veal chops and stew, lamb, shrimp scampi, vegetable risotto and other luxurious food, served by a seasoned, courtly staff. WA.

CHIAM

160 E. 48th St. (betw. Lexington & 3rd Aves.),

212-371-2323. \$\$\$. **All major.** An alternative to Shun Lee Palace when you're looking for high-level Chinese cuisine in an atmosphere that not only manages to avoid the irremediable vulgarity of which too many upscale Asian restaurants are guilty, but that's actually as elegant as any premium French place. Nice service and an array of culinary delights: meaty twin lobster rolls, steamed shrimp dumplings, noodles with seasonal vegetables, roast duck with plum sauce and slivers of pork with black peppercorns are just a few of the good dishes that are sold here. WA.

CINQUE TERRE

22 E. 38th St. (betw. Park & Madison Aves.),

212-213-0910. \$\$\$. **All major.** One taste of the intensely sweet, succulent Gulf shrimp grilled over wood coals at this unheralded Murray Hill restaurant—actually, has there ever been a good Murray Hill neighborhood restaurant that you couldn't describe as unheralded?—and you understand why Cinque Terre, even in the absence of much competition, deserves to be called the city's best Ligurian restaurant. Try the salt-cod galettes over whipped potato with caviar, pansoti with walnut sauce, or else the excellent risotto. WA.

MARCH

405 E. 58th St. (betw. 1st Ave. & Sutton Pl.),

212-754-6272. \$\$\$\$. **All major.** Perhaps it's the relatively out-of-the-way location of this townhouse restaurant that accounts for March's relatively low profile. It's certainly not chef Wayne Nish's fusion cooking, which is as extraordinary as it is expensive. Nish has disposed of the appetizer-entree-dessert paradigm to offer instead tasting menus comprised of a series of small, and almost impossibly sophisticated, dishes. Listen to this: confit de foie gras with garam masala, papadums and spicy pear chutney gets followed by a minuscule portion of Provençal "bau frizzant de muscat" sparkling wine sorbet with pink grapefruit in Tanqueray gin and coriander seed syrup. If Nish weren't a cook, he'd be constructing miniature timepieces. LWA.

NOCHE

1604 Broadway (betw. 48th & 49th Sts.),

212-541-7070. \$\$\$. **All major.** Fun and festive, Noche is a vibrant spot for Latin lovers. Three levels of dining are decked in vivid colors and filled with danceable sound. Many easily shared dishes on the long menu suit the groups of young tourists sucking down fruit-laden pitchers of red, white or Cava Sangria. Waiters specialize in snapshots. Start your fiesta with chunky queso fresco-topped guacamole, then choose from spirited mains like spicy shrimp or mojo-ed roast suckling pig. A litany of temptations on the dessert menu; for one, the coffee custard topped with pistachio cream and accompanied by delicate nut cookies. Andele! WA

OTABE

68 E. 56th St. (betw. Park & Madison Aves.),

212-223-7575. \$\$\$. **All major.** Penetrate its blank exterior and Otabe reveals one of the most authentically Japanese restaurant interiors in New York, with swooning greenery, graceful service and extreme quiet. In the Teppan Grill Room, it's a thrill to order the four-course sirloin steak

dinner, which gets cooked before your eyes. The rest of the food's excellent, too, but necessarily less dramatic. For a private alcove in the Grill Room, reserve well in advance. WA.

ROSA MEXICANO

1063 1st Ave. (58th St.),

212-753-7407. \$\$\$. **All major.** Oldest of the East Side's quartet of upscale Mexican restaurants—Zarela, Maya and Zocalo are the other three—Rosa Mexicano's huge popularity hasn't at all abated. And it shouldn't, either, since the restaurant continues to serve excellent food, not to mention excellent pomegranate margaritas, on its slightly kitschy premises. Great ceviches; coarse guacamole that's assembled from scratch at tableside by an obliging Mexican fellow who toodles along behind an avocado-encumbered cart; and, as entrees, worked-up Mexican dishes like prawns sauteed with garlic and parsley and served with black squid rice, steamed lamb shank and sea scallops sauteed with smoked chipotle chili sauce. Menudo exists for those who for some reason require it. Also check out the grilled meats and fish, which are succulently spiced. WA.

ANGUS MCINDOE

258 W. 44th St. (betw. B'way & 8th Ave.),

212-221-9222. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** Thespian-infested cozy bistro with exposed brick, swingout front windows and two votives per paper-topped table. Your basket of thick-sliced sourdough will quickly disappear. A nice variety of wines by the 1/4-liter. Fresh and meaty clams on the halfshell come with boldly spiced dippers. Fun to munch and shareable are the phyllo-wrapped duck spring rolls with hot-sweet peach chutney. French fries are soft and well-seasoned, hand-cut and twice-fried. Tarte tatin with caramel-topped vanilla gelato is perfect. Just try to finish the chocolate peanut-butter pie special. Piping hot coffee arrives via charming French presse. Casual vibe. WA

AQUAVIT

13 W. 54th St. (betw. 5th & 6th Aves),

212-307-7311. \$\$\$\$. All major. Pure, elegant Scandinavian-based cuisine by Marcus Samuelsson in this bilevel restaurant—the bottom-floor atrium soars, while the upstairs cafe is all warm, clean, soothing Nordic wood—and one of our favorite midtown high-end eateries. Appetizers we've appreciated in the past: the herring plate, which is served with Carlsberg beer and aquavit; a smoked salmon trio served with sevruga caviar, beets and cucumber salad; the lobster salad and the foie gras duo. And entrees: roast duck with seared foie gras fritters and mango sauce, a mustard-crust rack of lamb, seared venison, steamed lobster and lotus-crust char. Tasting menus are also offered, as well as a seven-course vegetarian menu for \$58. After half a dozen visits to Aquavit on high-stakes nights—family in from out of town, relatives here for the holidays, someone finally graduating from something or other—we've found nothing to complain about. Special-events groups will appreciate the charming service; drunks, the challenging aquavit flights. NWA.

BAYOU

308 Lenox Ave. (betw. 125th & 126th Sts.),

212-426-3800. \$\$-\$\$\$. **All major.** Like nearby Sylvia's, Bayou is a restaurant that draws safari groups of white people into Harlem to enjoy Southern-style cuisine. In this case, it's the Creole-inflected cooking of chef Steve Manning, formerly of Clancy's in New Orleans. Harlem is a long way from the French Quarter, where any dozen restaurants would kick Bayou's butt, but it's still a passable imitation, and arguably the best New Orleans-style eatery in Manhattan at this time. The second-floor room, around the corner from 125th St. and just up the street from the Lenox Lounge, is boisterous and welcoming, and the uniformly handsome young black staff friendly. Among the appetizers, the shrimp remoulade rules, and the cornmeal fried oysters, served over spinach and topped with brie, are contenders. The gumbo is tasty, if less hearty than you'd get down South. Entrees include reasonable facsimiles of signature Creole dishes—crawfish etouffee, shrimp

creole, po'boys at lunchtime—while the specials, like the breaded and fried softshell crabs in season, are more creative. Short wine list, better selection of beers. Not a knockout experience, but a fun meal, a good value (appetizers \$8-\$12, most entrees around \$15) and, for the white folk who make up maybe half the customers, a bit of a field trip as well. NWA

CAFE CON LECHE

424 Amsterdam Ave. (betw. 80th & 81st Sts.),

212-595-7000. \$-\$\$. All major. This brightly colored storefront restaurant combines elements of Dominican and Cuban cuisine. Nothing fancy, just barrio basics that you'd expect 40 blocks farther uptown, but that you'll be happy for here, too: the namesake coffee, of course, plus good arroz con pollo and roast pork sandwiches. You'll have to exert yourself heroically to spend more than 20 dollars per person. LWA.

DELTA GRILL

700 9th Ave. (48th St.),

212-956-0934. \$\$\$. All major. Bayou cuisine here at the Delta Grill, and just a little less gentrified than its Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. Which is to say that the place serves oysters Rockefeller, jambalaya, gumbo, shrimp Creole, blackened steak and other Cajun food that's better than that served at most of the kitsch-larded Cajun dumps you'll find on the East Coast. Loud and crowded, with a no-reservations policy (except for parties of six or more) that means you'll be waiting at the bar with the fratboys just as big and dumb as the ones at Louisiana State. The cooking is fine, though, the portions are huge and the price is right. The sweet-potato and pecan pie is one of the undying pleasures of our lives. WA.

FLOR DE MAYO

2651 Broadway (betw. 100th & 101st Sts.),

212-595-2525. \$-\$\$. All major. Home to some of our favorite roast chicken, this veteran Cuban-Chinese swings both ways with more success than most of the cafeterias to which it's generically allied. The chicken, massaged with garlic and lemon and pepper, bears a brown crust that betrays nuances of cinnamon; with yellow rice and black beans, and maybe an avocado salad or sauteed watercress with bean curd sauce if you're especially hungry, a dinner constructs itself. Plantains either way—maduros or tostones—are standouts. NWA.

44 & X HELL'S KITCHEN

622 10th Ave. (44th St.),

212-977-1170. \$\$-\$\$\$. All major. Decor of great camp meets Miami in this Western outpost where spontaneous chair-dancing breaks out, inspired more often by the food than by the zaftig DJ. You say you're reserved? Have the crunchy and avocado-rich Mediterranean chopped salad, the stuffed squash blossoms gushing goat cheese or gargantuan shrimps over roasted vegetable Israeli couscous with carrot kefir lime soup, and you, too, will be blurting "Wow!" and bouncing up and down in your seat. The menu changes with the seasons, but always features one of the the best mac & cheeses in town due in part to a free hand with the truffle oil. Tart lime tart comes a la mode with zingy lime frozen yogurt. Pucker up. LWA

JEZEBEL

630 9th Ave. (45th St.),

212-582-1045. \$\$\$. AE. High-budget southern food in a lush approximation of a speakeasy. Which means no windows, no glowing and inviting portal, no marquee—merely a minute brass sign that's easy to miss—and that we inevitably do, even though we've visited the place several times, and inevitably on the most vicious winter nights, when the wind off the Hudson's enough to blast an ambulating family of four clear across Midtown and into Queens. But you might do better. And when you finally do stumble into the secret place you'll find untrammelled Southern cuisine: fried chicken, ribs, porkchops and ham hocks, plus a few seafood specialties, and plenty of grits, okra and collard greens on the side. There are actually black people here. WA.

LA ROSITA

2809 Broadway (betw. 108th & 109th Sts.),

212-663-7804. \$-\$\$. All major. A Cuban cafeteria on that seedy stretch of upper Broadway just downtown of Columbia, and patronized by local Latinos (old men huddled at the counter with smokes, little girls with white dresses and their huge families, all congregated after a First Communion) and weedy students of law and ancient languages. Breakfast: rice and beans and eggs over easy, with creamy cafe con leche to burn off last night's effects. Lunch: white-bean soup and a Cuban sandwich to take on the road. Dinner: cold El Presidentes, plantains and a sloppy chicken stew. Always crowded after noon, and the windows steam over cozily when it gets cold. WA.

O'NEALS'

49 W. 64th St. (betw. B'way & Central Park W.),

212-787-4663. \$\$-\$\$\$. All major. A shout and a holler from Lincoln Center, which is perhaps the most exciting thing you can say about this burgers-and—beers joint that occupies part of the Ginger Man's old space. Still, there's nothing wrong with an adequate burgers-and-beer joint, and in fact O'Neals' pub food is never offensive and is often good. Chicken pot pie works well with a couple of beers, and it's pleasant to eat a turkey club in the high-ceilinged bar on an afternoon. Rumpled literary types stop in after a morning's work for a drink, and suburban matrons study librettos and sip coffee before matinees. Gentle, low-key, gracious. WA.

AL DI LA

248 5th Ave. (Carroll St.), Brooklyn,

718-783-4565. \$\$-\$\$\$. V, MC. We're Brooklyn nationalists, but we'd also be the first to admit that the pickings, foodwise, out here across the East River have historically been meager—especially in Park Slope, Cucina notwithstanding. And then Emiliano Coppa and his chef wife, Anna Klinger, brought their quaint Venetian trattoria to the neighborhood, and it was as if the shivering primitives had been delivered fire. You sit here, in the cozy space, under Coppa's grandmother's crystal chandelier, at sturdy tables and you drink your wine from juice glasses (just like they do in the Old Country) and the din of cheerful chatter rises. Since opening in 1998, the place seems never to have suffered a slow night. Grilled sardines are the perfect starter, followed by...anything else on the menu. But we'll take calf's liver or the hanger steak tagliata or the whole salt-crusted fish. If Park Slope had any sense at all, it'd float a bond issue to keep al di la right where it is, in perpetuity. WA.

CHIP SHOP

383 5th Ave. (6th St.), Brooklyn,

718-832-7701. \$-\$\$. No credit cards. While most English restaurateurs run screaming from traditional British pub grub, some punk-minded dissidents have recreated the planet's least healthy cuisine, in all its deep-fried glory, smack in the middle of ecotopian Park Slope. Of course it's a smash hit, with Birkenstock wearers, bar crawlers and Manhattan adventurers alike lining up for authentic fish & chips. The flaky cod (and now haddock) is thick with a perfect, golden batter coating; the fries' crisp skins surround gloriously mushy potato interiors. A menu including almost all the familiar (to Brits born in the 70s or later) pub favorites (steak & kidney pie, mushy peas, chip butty, treacle pudding, deep-fried Mars bar, etc.) and a room decorated with kitschy English memorabilia are the cappers. WA

COCO ROCO

392 5th Ave. (betw. 6th & 7th Sts.),

Brooklyn, 718-965-3376. \$\$. All major. Excellent and inexpensive Peruvian food on 5th Ave., on Park Slope's ragged edge. The ceviches here are great, but a fair percentage of the crowd on any given crowded evening has arrived for the truly superlative rotisserie chicken, which is served either whole or by the half, and with such sides as steamed vegetables, baked or sweet potatoes, french fries, fried sweet potatoes, plantains, fried yucca and rice and beans. The fruit shakes are fun, but we usually find ourselves drinking South American beer (the name of which we can never

remember) with our appetizers and then malbec with the bird. A restaurant the neighborhood's lucky to have. WA.

FAAN

209 Smith St. (Baltic St.), Brooklyn,

718-694-2277, 718-694-2266. \$\$ AE. A very hip new pan-Asian restaurant on Smith St. with terrace seating (although you'll be more comfortable inside) and a huge menu, including extensive selections from the sushi bar that anchors the rear of the stylish, colorful room. Dishes we've liked: a crispy calamari salad with lemongrass lime-ginger dressing; vegetarian spring rolls, both fried and not; miso soup; grilled pork chops with lemongrass; and teriyaki salmon. Cheap, casual, fun and—what's just as good—open late seven days a week. NWA.

JOYA

215 Court St. (betw. Wyckoff & Warren Sts.),

718-222-3484. \$\$-\$\$\$ No credit cards. Our favorite Brooklyn restaurant right now. The large space is soothingly industrial-minimalist: a concrete floor, a soaring ceiling, elegant gunmetal blue-gray walls off which resound the youthful crowd's chattering and amorous grunts. There's a bar up front, while toward the back, near the open kitchen (where steam rises from a gleaming world of stainless steel), you can eat all sorts of straight-up and very good Thai food (silken curries, beautifully delicate summer rolls). Or you can drink glasses of Sierra Nevada or Thai iced coffee, that beverage made of condensed milk and coffee black enough to have dripped from a crankcase. This stuff is sweet and so caffeinated it will blast you right through the roof and up toward the Brooklyn moon. WA.